THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF BAPTISM

By C. E. POCKNEE, Chairman of the Baptismal Reform Movement

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Although the writers of the New Testament have more references to Baptism than to the Eucharist, they afford no evidence or information as to how baptism was performed, that is by submersion, immersion or affusion. On the day of Pentecost we are told three thousand people were baptised in Jerusalem by the Apostles (Acts 2:41). No river runs through the city of Jerusalem and in May and early June the brook Kedron below the city is a mere trickle. The River Jordan is several miles away from Jerusalem. Baptism, therefore, could only have been in a pool. Recent commentators have pointed out that at the traditional place of our Lord's baptism in the Jordan there is not sufficient depth for the submersion of an adult unless the person lies flat on the bed of the stream. The popular supposition that baptism in the primitive church was always by total submersion cannot be sustained in the light of modern archaeology. The Mandaeans who are a sect claiming descent from St. John the Baptist baptize their adherents by ducking the candidate's head in the water as he stands in the river.

A distinction needs to be made between the terms 'submersion' and 'immersion'. The former means the total submersion of the body and head under the water. The latter means the candidate stands in the water up to his loins and receives an affusion or pouring of water over the head and shoulders. Modern research tends increasingly to confirm the view that immersion was the normal practice in the primitive church in the case of adults. Some liturgical and biblical commentators have taken too literally St. Paul's words: "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4) as implying that just as the body was put into a grave at burial and will arise at the resurrection, so in baptism the body is submerged under the water and arises in a new life in Christ. Those who have made this assumption of these words have failed to notice that in the Middle East in the first century A.D. and earlier earth burial in a grave was not usual since the normal method was in a cave or tomb. The writers of the Old Testament frequently allude to this fact and the burial of our Lord and Lazarus in this manner need no further comment. The catacombs at Rome and elsewhere show a similar method of burial. Before the immurement the body was sometimes sprinkled with earth. If this analogy between burial and baptism was pressed to its logical conclusion it would mean that baptism would always have to be affusion or sprinkling.

The earliest font now known to us is that which was uncovered in the 1930's in the house-church at Dura-Europos in Mesopotamia; and this is dated about A.D. 230. Archaeologists are agreed that this font is of insufficient depth or length to permit the submersion of an adult. After that date all the evidence shows that fonts were not usually of sufficient capacity to submerse an adult. Usually the candidate stood in the font or pool immersed up to the loins and then received an affusion of water over the head and shoulders. In some instances, as at the Lateran Baptistery, a spout or jet of water played into the font and the candidate had his head directed under the jet.

It is also necessary to take note that the earliest evidence does not support the idea that the candidate's 'Christian' name was given as he was baptised. The unfortunate popular error often extended to inanimate objects such as ships and boats, that baptism is a 'naming' ceremony only arose in the Middle Ages. In the

earlier centuries the candidate had in fact been 'named' several weeks earlier during the catechumenal ceremonies and exorcisms.

The other fashionable error common amongst baptismal reformers to-day is that during the primitive era of Christianity baptism was always performed in the presence of the local congregation and therefore was public. This idea is completely erroneous. For the fact is that the candidates, both men and women, were completely naked at the time of their baptism. As early as A.D. 150. Justin Martyr tells us that after their baptism the candidates were brought from the place of baptism to where the congregation was assembled for the Eucharist (Apol. 1:65). The writer of the Syrian *Didascalia* (about A.D. 230) says that the deaconesses assist the female candidates to undress as it is not fitting for them to be seen by men (Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, p. 146). St. Cyril of Jerusalem in his celebrated Catechetical Lectures at the end of the fourth century is very explicit that the candidates were as naked as Adam at the time of their baptism (Cat. 20:2). *The Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus about A.D. gives the same evidence.

The foregoing facts explain something which earlier archaeologists did not understand, namely, that all the older fonts stood in a baptistery separated from the main church building. The well-known examples at the Lateran, Rome, Pisa, Florence, Cremona, are all in Italy. But modern research has uncovered the remains of such separated baptisteries all round the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, including North Africa. The baptisteries were only normally attached to a cathedral, that is to the bishop's church, where the complete rite of initiation took place and not merely water-baptism. Only as water-baptism came to be sundered from confirmation and first communion in the Latin West in the Middle Ages were fonts introduced into parish churches.

Thus the candidates in the earlier centuries undressed assisted by the deacons and deaconesses. There were sometimes vestibules or ante-rooms attached to the baptistery for the disrobing. The font had columns around it and curtains could be drawn between these. Only the officiating bishop or priest and the sponsors witnessed the baptism. The candidate stood naked in the font with the water up to his loins and then was baptised over the head and shoulders in the name of the Trinity. Then the candidates were led across to the cathedral in white robes and the bishop gave them the anointing with the chrism and the imposition of the hand for the 'Seal' of the Spirit known variously as confirmation, consignation or chrismation and then followed the first Communion at the Eucharist.

No doubt the increasing custom of infant initiation after the fourth century made these separated baptisteries less necessary; but increasing evidence shows that even in the Middle Ages infants in arms were naked at their baptism which was by a threefold partial immersion in the font and not merely by an affusion of water over the head.

Finally, we draw attention to the implications of the Greek term, *Baptisma* to which greater study needs to be given. All lexicographers seem to be agreed that the term is used only by Christian writers in connexion with the baptism of John and Christian Initiation (see G. Kittel: *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*). It does not, therefore, appear in the LXX or in pagan Greek literature. There is a vast entry under this term in the new Oxford *Patristic Greek Lexicon*. Certainly, some of the Fathers understand the word to include the whole rite of initiation. Thus Origen (d. 253) wrote: "In the Acts of the Apostles through the laying on of apostolic hands the Holy Spirit was given in *baptisma*" (De Princ. I, iii, 2). The Nicene Creed in its Greek text as composed in the fourth century

uses this term in "one *baptisma* for the remission of sins". It may reasonably be claimed that the Creed implies the whole rite of *baptisma* since at that time it was not the custom to give infants in arms a partial initiation with water and then delay the completion of that initiation until years of discretion. Such a dichotomy only arose in the Latin West in the later Middle Ages.

As this term is used only of Christian Initiation and its immediate precursor and usually in the singular, we may claim that, in spite of all apparent or relative analogies, Christian *baptisma* is something new and unique.